

426 THE BALLAD OF
READING GAOL

The vilest deeds, like poison weeds,
Bloom well in prison-
air;
It is only what is good
in Man
That wastes and withers there:
Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate,
And the Warder is Despair.

For they starve the little frightened
child
Till it weeps both night and day:
And they scourge the weak, and flog
the fool,
And gibe the old and grey,
And some grow mad, and all grow
bad,
And none a word may say.

Each narrow cell in which we dwell
Is a foul and dark latrine,
And the fetid breath of
living Death
Chokes up each grated screen,
And all, but Lust, is turned to dust
In Humanity's machine.

The brackish water that we drink
Creeps with a loathsome slime,
And the bitter bread they weigh in
scales
Is full of chalk and lime,
And Sleep will not lie down, but
walks
Wild-eyed, and cries to Time.

But though lean Hunger and green
Thirst
Like asp with adder
fight,
We have little care of
prison fare,
For what chills and kills outright
Is that every stone one lifts by day
Becomes one's heart by night.

With midnight always in one's
heart,
And twilight in one's cell,
We turn the crank, or tear
the rope,
Each in his separate
Hell,
And the silence is more
awful far
Than the sound of a brazen bell.